Hannictober 2017 Ficlets Collection

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Hannictober 2017 Ficlets Collection

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

A collection of my ficlets for the Hannictober 2017 calendar . Summary will change to reflect the most current day, and warnings will be chapter-specific at the beginning of each.

Day 2: Moonlight = “Are you accusing me of murder?” Hannibal asks. "Well, no,” Will says, “I’m accusing you of serial murder and illegal human experimentation to provoke moonlight eyes. All in all, rather in line with the modus operandi of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Day 3: Leaf Piles = The first leaf of autumn signals the start of mating season, and, like every year, Will looks not to the ground and a potential mate, but to the sky and another year of being alone. Then he meets Hannibal.

Day 4: Ritual = “I said I’d volunteer to be your ritual sacrifice to stop a monster from devouring the town, I never said I’d be a *willing* ritual sacrifice," Will says.

Notes

WHAT UP FANNIBALS I'M ALIVE. Mostly. Anyways. I was figuring that I might try this Hannictober thing again, given that my last attempt went okay, and after some hesitation cuz I'm very late I was like "fsck it, let's just roll with it".

See the end of the work for more notes

Pumpkin Spice

Chapter Summary

> Here, at the end of the world, Will has Hannibal and magic and pumpkin spice, and that's all he needs.

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for this chapter: I know some people don't like post-apocalyptic AUs, so far warning, in this ficlet, most of the human population is dead. Mostly this has no bearing on the story because it's really just an excuse for Will & Hannibal to be alone but still.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I didn’t mean to,” is the first thing Will says.

Hannibal looks at him from the doorway, where he’s silhouetted against the sun like the giant black-skinned, antler-wielding, blood-dripping wendigo he truly is. It’s a sight that has inspired fear, fainting, and screaming in almost everyone they’ve ever come across, but even Will has to admit that Hannibal is a great deal less frightening with a cloud of pumpkin spice dotting his entire body.

“You,” Hannibal repeats slowly, “did not mean to throw an entire jar of pumpkin spice at me yelling ‘begone, demon’?”

Will blushes. In retrospect, it is fairly silly. Ever since Hannibal had first come across an orphaned Will in a town long since abandoned or killed by the plagues that have swept the world clean of most humans, they’ve kept a fairly low profile. Will can go several years without ever seeing another living being beyond Hannibal.

“In all fairness,” Will argues, “I’ve never heard you make that much noise.”

“There is a first time for everything.” Hannibal sighs and pats gently at his chest, the long sharp claws most suited for disemboweling meat at odds with the domestic actions of tidying up. “I suppose you have come far in your training. But for future reference, pumpkin spice requires a great deal more magical energy for it to accomplish anything as complicated as banishing a creature of the night.”

“I know, I normally use mountain ash, but it was the closest thing I had on hand.”

Hannibal gives him an approving nod, and Will preens under the praise. Will had been silent and rather helpless beforehand, equipped with only his fierce determination and willingness to bite and bite hard, and Hannibal had taken him under his wing, spirited him away from the village of death and destruction and taught him how to survive. Hannibal had shown him how to hunt, how to move silently in the fields, and most importantly, how to summon that enormous rage and determination and channel it into charms and spells. Hannibal's a hard teacher, but in some ways that is for the best. The world is harder now, after all.

"Did you have a good hunt?" Will asks politely, because after the first time Will had kicked him in the privates and bitten his arm, Hannibal had chided, *Rude, little boy, how rude.*

Hannibal hums noncommittally. Wendigos prefer human meat, Will knows, but humans are far and few between nowadays; now Hannibal mostly sustains himself on what creatures remain. It's a good thing that wendigos can go for decades without eating.

Still, Hannibal also likes to go out and roam every day regardless. He's not the kind of creature who can tamed or cooped up, even if he has consented to slow his pace to accommodate a slow moving human.

"No humans?"

Hannibal's mouth crinkles into a tiny smile. "Do I detect a trace of longing in your voice, my dear boy?"

Will shrugs. So he's curious. He hasn't met another human in a long, long time. Hannibal has gifted him with a few books, but that's nothing compared to the real, living thing.

"The answer is no," Hannibal informs him. "I have gone to the very edges of our territory, and there has been no scent of any caravans. The trees tell me that most humans have returned to a nomadic habit, which is wise; the old ones are stirring now, with so much fresh blood to sate their stomachs, and to stay in one place without the blessing of an old one is . . . rather rude."

"And you, old one?" Will teases, clutching at Hannibal when he comes close and nuzzling into the crook of his alien shoulder. "Do I have your blessing to remain in your territory?"

"I may have to retract it, after this incident."

"I suppose I'll have to seek out another old one, then. Offer them blood and sweat and seed," Will muses. "Do you think any of them will have me, Hannibal?"

"Oh, my dear boy," Hannibal says, "one of them already has you."

The kiss is still new, because Hannibal's kind have far more ambitious mating rituals that Will is frankly mostly physically incapable of performing, but Will has seen several illustrations of so-called "true love" and Hannibal seems to have no objections to Will leaning up and pressing his mouth to Hannibal's. Hannibal's arms around him are powerful and dangerous, but Will has no fear; he has the blessing and favor of an old one, and Hannibal would never harm him.

Not unless Will asks, anyways.

Will breaks off the kiss to press their cheeks together, like the wild animals they are. “Do you need blood, my own?”

A fine shudder runs through Hannibal. “William.”

It’s a warning as much as an offer. Will knows that magic makes his blood even more tempting to Hannibal than it was when he was a tiny, innocent child, and although intellectually he knows that Hannibal would not drain him dry, it’s still a concern that sends his heart racing and makes his fingers spark. Still, Hannibal abhors rudeness. He did not drink Will’s blood until Will practically shoved his arm down the wendigo’s throat, and even now, Hannibal resists. He always gives Will a chance to back down.

Will sets his teeth to Hannibal’s shoulder. He’s nowhere near strong enough to actually inflict injury, but he knows Hannibal enjoys the threat even if he disregards its power. “Go on then, my old one,” Will whispers. “Take what you need.”

Hannibal shudders again, like one of the spooked, downed deer they hunt for food before Will or Hannibal slits their throat and puts them out of the misery, and then he leans down and fastens his mouth to Will’s neck and Will – Will *drowns*.

Afterwards, Hannibal makes a poultice of the remaining pumpkin spice and gently binds it to Will’s neck.

“I thought that was for flavoring food and drinks,” Will says, careful not to move too much with Hannibal’s sharp claws so close to his spine and his arteries.

“Yes, I understand that it was used as such when humans ruled,” Hannibal says absently. “But pumpkins have always been versatile. For example, they symbolized the change of seasons. Beyond that, they meant prosperity, fertility, and healing. With the right hands, they can heal almost anything.”

“Everything is always a lesson with you.”

“But of course. How else am I to keep you from running off and finding a rival of mine to bind yourself to?”

Will scoffs. He’s seen some of the other old ones that have awoken to roam the earth once again. Perhaps a few are impressive, but then again, most of his encounters with other old ones have been when Hannibal took offense to them and tore them apart, so it’s not like Will finds them terribly interesting.

So for Will, it’s common sense to retort, “What could possibly rival you?”

“Flattery,” Hannibal smiles, but when Will draws him close for another kiss, he does not resist, and Will feels it deep in his bones, the bond they share, and he knows he will never be able to leave Hannibal, just as much as Hannibal will never be able to abandon him.

It’s probably not what Hannibal envisioned his future to hold when he scooped up a crying child and carried him off, but that’s okay. Will has more than enough imagination for the both of them.

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

Why do I always end up with blood drinking and sexy times, I have no idea okay. It was supposed to be a half-cracky thing more akin with the spirit of 'oops I threw a jar of pumpkin spice at you' but alas then we ended up with this post apocalypse thing. Oh well.

Day 2: Moonlight = ummmmmmmmm I guess we'll both find out won't be XD

WARNING: I am currently occupied with two other major projects right now, so if the lateness of my entrance to the challenge tells you nothing, I should warn you that updates will be sporadic and possibly months late. Just FYI. *blows kisses at you*

Moonlight

Chapter Summary

> “Are you accusing me of murder?” Hannibal asks. "Well, no,” Will says, “I’m accusing you of serial murder and illegal human experimentation to provoke moonlight eyes. All in all, rather in line with the modus operandi of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Chapter Notes

> Disclaimer: All relevant Hannibal quotes came from Œuf, which was S1E4.
>
> Warnings for this chapter: um, discussion of illegal human experimentation? Cuz Hannibal likes to play with his food, basically. Nothing too graphic, just mention for it.
>
> How this story happened:
> Me: "Moonlight. What can we do for moonlight?"
> My Muse: "He walked in the moonlight with moonlight eyes."
> Me: " . . . I can't use that line, that's terrible."
> My Muse: "HE WALKED IN THE MOONLIGHT WITH MOONLIGHT EYES."
> Me: "Well, I guess I can take the moonlight eyes part."
> My Muse: "Only if you add in illegal human experimentation!"
> Me: "Why me"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tell me about your mother,” Hannibal says.

Will smirks. He is the picture of an open book, lounging in his chair, but for the fact that his lounge is exaggerated and staged. In reality, he reads like a dusty tome, one armed with teeth to snap at the fingers of unsuspecting readers. “Some lazy psychiatry, Dr. Lecter. Low hanging fruit and all.”

“I suspect that fruit is on a high branch. Very difficult to reach.”

“So is my mother. Never knew her.” Will throws down the words like a challenge, as he probably has countless times before to countless psychiatrists.

He’s probably hoping to frighten Hannibal off, but here’s the thing: Hannibal *loves* challenges. So instead he just leans forward and says, “An interesting place to start.”

Will hums, blinking lazily like a great cat. “Nah, I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t we start with those moonlight eyes of yours, Dr. Lecter? Let’s begin there instead.”

Hannibal blinks. Just once, but to one such as Will, perhaps quite tellingly so. He thinks he can be forgiven the lapse, though; he learned to control his moonlight eyes a long time ago. It’s considered improper to discriminate against those who bear them, but no patient wants to be treated by a doctor who has moonlight eyes.

“Don’t tell me you’re unaware that you have them,” Will drawls. His lounge expands and shifts, until Will covers every inch of the chair he has claimed for his own. “Or that you’re unaware what they mean. Moonlight eyes are as common in Europe as they are in America.”

“I am aware. They symbolize those who have seen death firsthand. In the old days, moonlight eyes were seen as signs of a murderer or a witch, and often served as the only evidence necessary for a guilty verdict and an execution. In scientific terms, this phenomenon occurs when chemistry of the air around someone is changed by a significant addition of blood, and the eyes deploy specific countermeasures to protect the iris from blood-borne pathogens. The eyes seem to turn completely white and are best seen under the light of the moon, earning the nickname ‘moonlight eyes’.”

Will laughs. “Of course you know the scientific reason.”

“The theory,” Hannibal corrects gently. “Many scientists have conducted experiments, and none have been successful in replicating the moonlight eyes effect in controlled circumstances.”

Will doesn’t move, but his eyes flicker and between one blink and the next, Will’s eyes gleam pure white. Moonlight eyes, the eyes of angels and demons, unnerving as much for their unexplainable cause as much as their inhuman glow. Almost every serial killer in human history – the ones that were caught anyways – has been found with moonlight eyes.

It also explains a great deal.

“And who did you see die, Will?” Hannibal asks softly.

Will grins like a wolf being shot with arrows – full of pain and savage pride. “Oh, no, that’s not how this works. I asked you a question, Dr. Lecter. And you’re good, you’re very good, but we moonlight eyes always know each other.”

Hannibal spreads his hands. “I am unsure what explanation you seek from me. When I was a child, my parents were murdered right in front of me.”

“No, I don’t think that was why. You see, many medical schools conduct tests for moonlight eyes. It’s . . . considered improper, but for certain fields, no patient will see a doctor with moonlight eyes. If you’re in oncology or an EMT, sure, moonlight eyes probably will happen. But surgeons – no one wants a surgeon with moonlight eyes, lest they be someone who killed someone on the table.”

Will leans forward, eyes still so beautifully white. Hannibal can't see his pupils now – another unnerving trait – but he knows they are fixed straight on his own eyes, still determinedly not white.

"And I looked you up, Dr. Lecter," Will says, like a challenger throwing down a gauntlet. "When you were admitted to medical school, you passed the moonlight tests. And I think you're more the clever enough to fool the tests, but when the police questioned you in France, you passed their tests too, and police tests are always much more rigorous. So. I'll ask you again, Dr. Lecter: what death turned your eyes white?"

Silence falls. Hannibal is not adverse to picking up this gauntlet – far from it, as he wants to see just how well Will's moonlight eyes can see – but he's not selfless. There are things he wants in return.

"When I was in the emergency room," Hannibal answers finally. "I was on a late shift, and they brought in a man gravely injured. A hunter, I believe. I was not able to save him. It was the first death on my watch where I was the attending. He could have survived, but I was not able to save him. I suppose that . . . unfairness grated on me. The next morning, I had moonlight eyes."

"Lie," Will says immediately.

Hannibal arches an eyebrow. He is far from his preferred weapons, but Will is unarmed and stinks of fever. He could still bring Will down, even if it might take a little longer. Then again, Will is a mongoose; perhaps it would not be unexpected for him to put up a gorgeous struggle for life.

"Well, okay, most of that was the truth," Will admits after a moment. "But a lie of omission is still a lie, Dr. Lecter."

"That is the entire story."

"Uh-huh. Well, here's the funny thing: Jeremy Olmstead didn't have moonlight eyes when he went under your knife, Dr. Lecter. He did have them when the medical examiner performed an autopsy. So how do you explain that?"

"People die in emergency rooms."

Will snorts and propels himself to his feet. Hannibal would tense, but Will immediately paces away instead of towards him, and at such a distance, Will would have to work up a truly great speed to reach him before Hannibal could take defensive action. In fact, with Will at such a great distance, Hannibal could easily slip his shoes off and take Will down the same way he took down Miriam Lass.

"That's your great excuse? That's terrible, Dr. Lecter. But perhaps that's why you've survived so long. Because you know the other thing that's interesting about you? Not a single one of your victims since Jeremy Olmstead have had moonlight eyes, despite your obvious fascination with it."

Hannibal takes a deep breath. “Are you accusing me of murder?”

“Well, no,” Will says, perching himself on Hannibal’s desk, arms open and loose. He grins like a little boy. “I’m accusing you of serial murder and illegal human experimentation to provoke moonlight eyes. All in all, rather in line with the modus operandi of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal reflects, rather dimly, that perhaps Will has a point. Choking Will is glorious, even as he struggles and kicks against Hannibal’s superior strength, but it has a flair of danger that not a single one of Hannibal’s former victims has been able to match. Taking down a fellow moonlight eyes is like taking down a fellow apex predator, because even fellow killers were often of the mundane and boring variety. But to pit oneself in a contest against someone else with that same irrationally beautiful reaction to a death? It is addicting.

Of course, Will has his own tricks. Hannibal’s not sure where the knife came from, but it leaves a stinging line of fire against Hannibal’s chest and he releases Will.

“Ah, ah,” Will wheezes, waving the knife like it’s a toy and not a weapon. “You don’t want to kill me, Dr. Lecter. If you do, you’ll never find out how to cause moonlight eyes.”

Hannibal pauses. His own eyes prickle with the desire to release his control and flash his own moonlight eyes, but he holds back. “An officer of the law, and you are encouraging illegal experimentation, William? How interesting.”

“I’m not an officer; I’m a consultant. And it’s not experimentation. Experimentation implies I have no idea what exactly causes the intended effect. This is just . . . science.”

“And why me?”

Will smiles coyly at him. “Because you’re the only other killer I’ve ever met who learned how to hide his moonlight eyes.”

And, well, how can Hannibal turn down an invitation like that? He straightens up, letting his own mask drop, and watches the way Will licks at his lips when Hannibal’s eyes light up with that same moonlight glow that has defied scientific explanation for thousands of years. He can understand the impulse, for when he first took a second look at Will Graham, snarling and petulant, and had caught a glimpse of the moonlight eyes shining back at him, he too had felt the great need to possess and study and capture.

“Child’s play, really,” Hannibal demurs.

“What you’ve been doing to attempt to provoke moonlight eyes? Hell yeah. Let me show you the right way it’s done, you’re embarrassing.”

“You’re celebrating causing moonlight eyes with a dinner party?!”

“Ah, good, you received your invitation. I have made an appointment with a reputable tailor, so please attend that meeting; my guest of honor needs to look presentable.”

Will glares at him. It would be much more effective if it was done with human eyes, for Will and Hannibal had butted heads too many times with their moonlight eyes; to them, moonlight eyes are the norm now. “This is how serial killers get caught, you idiot. You’re making a path to follow.”

“It is Halloween. I can hardly skip that occasion to celebrate.”

“If you decorate any part of that mausoleum you call a house with eyeballs, I *will* slurp my food.”

“In truth, with some cultures, slurping food is considered the highest compliment.”

“Then I’ll stab out your eyes and add them to the decorations and see how it takes someone to notice,” Will purrs, as though he isn’t an inch from Hannibal’s face and has their legs entangled so closely that both of them would probably trip if they tried to walk. “I can use the methods you taught me on extracting eyeballs.”

“Now that,” Hannibal says in between kisses, “would be the highest compliment for those of us with moonlight eyes.”

“You’re so weird.”

“I am not the one who spent the entire lesson cross-eyed as they tried to figure out how to have one moonlight eye and one human eye.”

“Eh, you’re just jealous that I thought of the idea first.”

Hannibal smiles and lets his own eyes flicker, until at last one eye remains human and the other glows pure white. He does not begrudge Will’s imagination for coming up with the idea, but Will sometimes lacks the pure dedication that Hannibal can put into appearances. There’s a reason Hannibal made an appointment with a tailor for Will.

“You peacock,” Will accuses. “How am I supposed to top that?”

“Oh, I have faith that you’ll think of something. You show me yours,” Hannibal says, smiling, “and I’ll show you mine.”

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

Day 3 was "leaf piles". I sorta have an idea rolling around involving fairies and mating seasons and stuff, but we'll see what actually happens. If you read my HannibalAdvent collection, it'll probably be in line with my "gingerbread house" story.

That terrible line came from X-Men First Class. I know it wasn't original there either, but that's the most vivid recollection I have of it, so there we go.

And updates are probably going to be more regular, because I've finally polished off pretty much all of my to-do list (Murder Husbands Big Bang, Gradence Trick or Treat, & a birthday gift). So yay for that XD. I'm gonna try and keep my calendar clean for November so I can finish up all my woefully incomplete ficlet collections. (We'll see how long that resolution lasts anyways.)

Leaf Piles

Chapter Summary

The first leaf of autumn signals the start of mating season, and, like every year, Will looks not to the ground and a potential mate, but to the sky and another year of being alone. Then he meets Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: um n/a I think. Nothing bad really happens here

Last year for this prompt I did something based off a tv show, so this year I thought I'd aim for something a little more . . . original. Instead I just ended up writing about more faeries. Oh well. So here, have 5k about faerie mating rituals and magic and wings and stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first leaf of autumn falls on a Friday, and the entire faerie community takes notice. A sigh runs through the trees as the winds blow. A million eyes look to the ground even as little hands begin the arduous process of preparing the clothes and the food packs necessary to surviving away from the trees that sustain them. The children who have never been to the ground before chatter and gossip while the elders sigh and share stories of the days they too made the ride down to the leaf piles.

Of course, not every eye is aimed at the ground.

The first leaf of autumn signals the start of mating season, and, like every year, Will looks not to the ground and a potential mate, but to the sky and another year of being alone.

“Are you going to ride down with us this year?” Alana asks.

Will winces, because it’s an instinctual reaction. Normally, every faerie who comes of age is itching to go the ground for the first time, and it’s something that is driven as much by the curiosity to feel earth beneath their feet for the first time as much as it is the desire to find a mate to cuddle with during the colds of winter.

Will passed that age a long time ago, and he has never had a mate. Not once. So he shrugs, and says, “I have enough food to last me through the winter.”

“But you’ll be cold,” Alana protests.

“That’s what clothes are for.”

“That’s what *mates* are for.”

She’s not wrong, exactly. Faeries don’t just ride the leaves down to find mates in leaf piles for fun and to procreate; faeries do it because alone, most of them do not have the magical strength to keep their homes warm through the winter and still be able to venture out to find food when the stockpiles run low. A mate – even a partner that lasts one winter and no more – is normally a welcome addition to the household.

Of course, Will hasn’t been normal since the first day that he accidentally set fire to the tree his parents were nesting in and his entire neighborhood had had to abandon their homes for a new tree.

“What you mean,” Will says, “is that it isn’t normal, Alana. Well, newsflash: I’m not normal.”

Alana sighs. She’s very pretty, Will admits; once upon a time, he had had held half-hearted fantasies of riding the leaves with the rest of his kind and, perhaps, being lucky enough to come across Alana and not act like a helpless idiot. She is kind and smart, and sharing a nest with her would probably be bearable enough. Then, of course, Alana had met Margot, and Will had watched the two of them sprout wings for the first time and fly to the highest canopies in the forest and known that he could never compete.

That’s okay, though. Margot never judges him and is always willing to get drunk off the morning dew when Will is in that type of mood.

“Will,” Alana says, “it’s not about being . . . normal. You could survive being on your own during winter, and we both know it. But maybe you shouldn’t *need* to. Our kind is meant to live and work together. There’s a reason that we only sprout wings once we’ve found a partner to weather the winter cold.”

Will shrugs. He’s ridden on the back of a butterfly once; flying is not exactly an inescapable dream.

Alana catches the look on his face and pokes him. “That butterfly doesn’t count.”

“If you say so.”

To Will, the idea of growing wings is perhaps more terrifying than the idea of never being to experience flying on his own. He knows he can; every faerie can. But to be on the ground, already exposed to so many predators and then to end up writhing as wings emerge from his skin and dry and strengthen – that does not sound like his idea of a fun time.

“Come on, Will,” Alana urges, nudging his shoulder with hers. “Just one leaf ride. Just one. If you don’t find someone, you can always climb back up; I’ve seen you do it.”

Alana says “climb back up” the way the elders talk about the evergreens. Will maintains that it’s more unnatural to be a tree-dwelling race that cannot climb the very things they call home than it is to be an evergreen dwelling faerie who has wings all year long, but alas, Will is rather the minority in that decision. Most parents scold children who attempt to climb and flying is seen as the best way to travel, even if they only grow wings during fall and shed them in spring.

“Just one,” Alana says.

Will sighs. “But that might require me to be sociable.”

“For every faerie, there is a leaf,” Alana quotes with a straight face. It’s a stupid saying, but it is the mantra of their kind: for every faerie born, there is a leaf to be ridden to the ground for the mating season.

“Yeah, a leaf. Not a mate or a baby.”

“Oh, just shut up and ride the leaves for once.”

For every community, the date of the leaf-riding is different. It’s more a gut instinct in their bones than any official date set by the sun and stars. One day, everyone just wakes up and knows it is the time to prepare to ride the leaves to the ground to seek out a mate.

Will maintains that it is a complete and utter crock of crap, and therefore he doesn’t even wake up until Margot bursts through the door and drags him to the nearest branch.

Fortunately, this delay means that he misses most of the elders’ speeches.

“For every faerie, there is a leaf,” intones the elder, garbed in a rich purple robe and waving a stick. “And so once more, our kind heads to the ground – to find our mates, to find our kindred, and to find our future! May the winds grace us on our journey, my brothers and sisters!”

“And may we find out future in the leaf piles,” the community drones back.

Will just yawns. He knows the chant as well as any other faerie child, having been drilled in it for years and years, but it holds no meaning to him. Sometimes the leaves are driven into piles by the wind, true, but sometimes they are driven into piles by the strange giants on the ground. Their future is more beholden to the hands of fate than the winds and the leaf piles.

Of course, by the time he’s readied a sarcastic response, the first celebratory whoops are already beginning.

One by one, the faeries detach the leaves from their branches and begin riding them to the ground. Those who are experienced know how to ride the winds and guide their fall, but the young ones just cling to the edges and go where the winds take them, whooping and cheering, alternately riding them like chairs or dangling beneath them like flying packs teachers use in lesson plans.

The yells are echoed across the forest as more and more of their kind take to the winds. Some will fall close by and return to their native trees to shelter in winter, but some are blown far off course and may choose a closer tree and partner. The leaf riding is always bittersweet, for there are always those who are never seen again and whose parents will never see their grandchildren, but that is the way of their kind. It is how the magic of the forest remains balanced and fruitful, and they have long accepted that. Therefore, after most of the hugging, the tree empties at a fairly steady rate.

Will scratches his chin and contemplates the nearest leaves. One is still green and soft, which he knows instinctively will bend too much for a good flight. One is dry and brittle and orange; it will break and turn to dust and send him plummeting to his death.

The last, though, is perfect. It is bright red and in the perfect medium; just dry enough to be easy to detach but still soft and healthy enough to be maneuverable.

Will doesn't really know *how* he knows such things, but then again, faerie education is mainly limited to things that cannot be gleaned by instinct. And as it is, it's fairly short; Will was considered fully educated from when he entered school in the spring and left it in fall. Instinct and magic drive the faerie kind through most of their life.

So Will obeys that instinct for once in his life: he grabs the perfect leaf, takes a deep breath, and then runs off the branch, flinging himself into the air with the leaf braced over him like a blanket.

For a minute, it's terrifying: the sheer drop from the top of the tree, with no rope to catch him and no branch to grab for.

But then – but then the wind catches him, sending his curls tumbling all over his face and arresting his fall, and Will is dancing along the currents, flying on his own for the first time in his life, and the yell that leaves his mouth is half fear and half exhilaration. It's echoed by a dozen other whoops and yells, and he looks around to see faeries all over the place in various stages of flight and emotion, and for the first time in his life, he feels part of the forest in a way he never has before. He can feel the magic of the forest vibrating through him as thousands of his kin take to the air, filling the sky with every color combination from every community, a vibrant display of life and power, and he lets the yells of excitement burst from him uncontrolled, raising the fever pitch of the magic of the forest until it's an audible hum that rings in his ears.

For one moment, he understands, viscerally, why the leaf riding is essential to the continuation of the forest and faerie kind.

Which is why the wind comes, and he's too busy cursing to yell or call out in joy as he struggles to not die. It's a beautiful thing, thousands of faeries in the air, but it's also incredibly dangerous; Will alone smacks into a dozen faeries as he wrestles his leaf against the wind, and when he finally comes down to land, he looks around and does not recognize a single tree.

Well, Will thinks, *this might have impulsive.*

Then he looks at the sky, squints a bit, and starts making the long and arduous journey in the direction he thinks will take him home.

Hours later, the sun is close to setting, and Will is still not anywhere near where his community is. He has passed countless leaf piles where faeries of all ages and communities are flirting and laughing and occasionally scandalizing the children, but he has not recognized anyone. The languages are completely different, the clothing styles and colors are unfamiliar, and even the magic itself here feels strange. It crackles and pulses, and it does not resist Will using it, but it does feel wild in a way Will's community tree never did.

It does not at all help Will's feelings about this matter when someone lands behind him and startles him so much that he whirls around and blasts the faerie into a rock.

"Well," remarks the faerie from where he's tumbled head over heels and out of sight, "that is one way to demonstrate strength."

Will bares his teeth. He actually only meant to shove the stranger away, not send him bashing into the rock, but he doesn't back down. Not all faeries obey the rules and understand that the point of the leaf piles is to find a partner to shelter through winter; some only see it as a means to spread their genetics, and their language is more violence than gentle courtship.

Then the faerie stands up and Will gets a good look at him, and he blinks in shock.

Because this faerie has *wings*.

And not the kind of wings Will has seen all his life, with rounded edges and vibrant colors. This faerie has wings with sharp slants and muted earth tones, and he moves as though they are natural and not recently emerged from his back. Most damning of all is that they bear faint scars, rippling along the edge of one wing and straight across the other.

Certainly, this faerie could have fought with someone after his wings emerged. But the leaf riding started today, and wings do not heal that fast.

"You're an evergreen," Will says.

The faerie tilts his head and smiles. Even his teeth are strange; sharp, like fangs, like the predators that come with hungry bellies and cause faeries in leaf piles to scramble for safety. Not all of them make it. "An astute observation," the evergreen faerie replies. "And you are a deciduous, and far from nest or community, and . . . have no wings of your own."

"So?"

"So, I was . . . curious. I have not seen someone without wings before."

Evergreens, Will remembers, bear their wings all year long. They grow them in the womb and strengthen them in childhood. He's never seen one before, but they've all heard the tales of the great wars before the rules were laid down: evergreens nested in evergreens and deciduous nested in deciduous. Such it has been since almost the dawn of their kind.

“It’s nothing that exciting,” Will says. “We build ladders. We make pulleys to ferry food. Wings do not enter the picture until mating season.”

“So it was taught to us. It is still rather different to see in person.”

Will takes a step back when the evergreen steps forward, and bares his teeth again. “If you’re thinking to try and kick-start my wings,” he warns, “I believe I just proved that I can kill you rather easily.”

“Yes, it was impressive,” the evergreen agrees easily. He flicks his wings before he relaxes them entirely and he also spreads his hands almost as if he is trying to copy the wingless body language of the deciduous. “Do not fear, little one. I just wanted to get a closer look. That is all. I mean you no harm.”

He is not lying, exactly, but Will can see the curiosity gleaming in the evergreen’s eyes. He does want to see how a deciduous faerie’s wings come out. He’s just not stupid enough to think that such a feat can be done by force.

And maybe it’s a stupid decision, but the sun is setting and Will is getting desperate. This evergreen is strong and well-fed, and it shows in his muscled arms and rounded face. He knows how to survive here. He probably also knows the community well enough to stop them from slaughtering or chasing Will out because he’s an outsider without a mate.

“Wait!” Will calls out as the evergreen’s wings flutter and he prepares to take off. “Wait. I’ll make you a bargain.”

“Indeed?” says the evergreen, looking amused and hovering just the tiniest bit off the ground. Show off. “And what could you possible offer me, deciduous?”

“You show me where a good place to sleep is and where to find some food,” Will bargains, “and I’ll let you see my wings.”

“How forward of you.”

“Not that way,” Will sighs, because of course the evergreen’s mind goes to mating. “It’s called magic, evergreen. Haven’t you ever used it to see beneath the veil of skin and diagnose problems?”

“No,” the evergreen says bluntly. “Normally, I use it to kill my enemies.”

“Leaves above. Never mind.”

“That wasn’t a refusal, deciduous.”

“Call me that one more time and I’ll blast you out of the air.”

The evergreen’s wings flicker in amusement. Will hadn’t even known one could still be flying and convey amusement with wing body language. But the evergreen lands all the same, and his eyes are softer and his shoulders relaxed. “Then perhaps,” he says, “it is time for a more formal introduction. I am called Hannibal.”

“Will.”

“Will,” Hannibal repeats. “An interesting name. Follow me.”

Hannibal leads him to an old stump. The tree trunk lies in rotten ruins around them, but it makes for a good home all the same, as it requires no climbing or major flying, and Hannibal has evidently excavated through the stump and into the ground to expand his . . . well, whatever evergreens call their homes.

“I am considered abnormal by my kind,” Hannibal explains when he catches Will poking at the dirt walls. “Normally we make our nests very high in the air, since we can fly, and most of our trees retain their leaves which we can use to defend our nests. I chose to go underground.”

“So we’re both uncommon,” Will murmurs.

“If that pleases you to think so,” Hannibal says, rummaging through some sort of storage container. “Please, do sit.”

Deciduous tend to use hand-carved utensils and bowls. Magic is reserved for flying, and so when the faeries are young, they master the necessary skills by hand: how to carve, how to sew, how to mend. The bowls Hannibal brings out are wilder, rougher, and each is unique. If they didn’t stink of magic, Will would already know that they were not carved by hand.

“And you said you had difficulty controlling your magic for fine tasks,” Will says, poking at the nearest bowl.

“Difficulty can be overcome with time and practice,” Hannibal replies. He parcels out some steaming kind of soul and garnishes it with some green leaf with sharp edges. “Please eat; the soup will help warm you.”

“Do you evergreens always use sharp things?”

“It’s just a herb used to flavor the soup,” Hannibal sniffs. He eats with delicate, quick movements. Not in a hurry, like he thinks that someone will steal his portion, but like a habit of good manners. He even pats delicately at his mouth afterwards with a tiny little napkin that he produces from one of his many pockets.

Will swallows his commentary about how deciduous tend to eat fresh food and avoid cooked meals and just takes his first sip. It makes his entire body shudder, because Hannibal is right; the soup is quite warm and it feels like a fire passing down his spine, lighting sparks of warmth in every corner of his body. After walking for so long in the biting wind, it makes Will want to drain the entire soup in one swallow and then lick the bowl clean.

He doesn’t do that, but he does eagerly accept a second helping from a clearly amused Hannibal.

“What’s in this?” Will asks.

Hannibal just smiles at him. “Oh a little bit of this and that.”

“Evasive evergreens.”

“Determined deciduous.”

They’re the oldest insults in the book – Will hasn’t used them himself since he was a child playing tag – but they come naturally to him, because in every single story he’s ever heard, evergreen faeries were known for being evasive and brutal and stealthy, and Hannibal fits that perfectly.

Still, it makes Hannibal smile, so perhaps evergreens have their own stories about deciduous.

Hannibal serves Will more soup, and then some weird bread that is soft and warm and chewy and utterly delicious, and then some sweet hardened thing that Hannibal calls candy. By the end, Will is full and listing to the side, barely able to keep his eyes open. Hannibal clears away the dishes and then leads him to a very nice and dark hollow in the back where two strange nets are strung up.

It makes Will hesitate, to say the least. Deciduous always sleep on sturdy ground.

“Is there a problem?” Hannibal asks.

Will pushes the net tentatively. “Is this . . . uh . . . how evergreens always sleep?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answers, but his wings flick thoughtfully. “I suppose we are used to being suspended off of the ground. It is useful to get our children acclimatized to the sensation of drifting in the air.”

“Is it safe?”

Hannibal flops down in answer. The net sways alarmingly, but it is fastened sturdily because it does not collapse and dump the evergreen unceremoniously on the ground.

“You are my guest,” Hannibal says, closing his eyes. “It would not do to harm a guest.”

In deciduous culture, a guest is a serious affair. Anyone who enters the home by invitation and who eats at their table is to be honored as any elder in the family. Harming a guest is akin to the slaughter of the innocent. Will never realized it was something evergreens and deciduous both agreed upon, but it settles his unease a little bit. In the end, they are both faeries and they both were born to fly; maybe these strange net-beds will not be so terrible after all.

It sways and creaks when Will climbs in, which takes a few attempts of his own, but eventually he settles down and lets it rock him into a soothing sleep.

Will shows Hannibal his wings the next morning. He finds the closest leaf pile, makes sure there aren’t any combative or territorial faeries nearby, and then he sheds his shirt and shivers in the cool morning air as Hannibal approaches.

“Your back is smooth,” Hannibal notes. “If you did not tell me there were wings lurking underneath, I would not be able to tell.”

Will shrugs, flexing his spine. “We adapted to hide it. And magic always helps.”

Then he kneels and reaches for the crackling, wild magic that runs through Hannibal’s forest. It responds eagerly, but almost too eagerly, like a dam that’s finally had its last barrier removed and now flows free. Will is barely able to channel it enough that it doesn’t swallow him whole, but he manages, and he winds it through his spine so that his fledging wings gleam beneath his skin.

The heat of Hannibal is so close then that Will tenses, but all Hannibal does is mutter something in his own tongue. “Beautiful,” Hannibal says. “Are all of your kind’s wings so beautiful?”

“Are all of your kind’s wings so sharp?”

He lets the magic go, and Hannibal steps back, looking incredibly amused. Well, amused isn’t the right word; it’s more like . . . a desire to possess, if one did not assume that one was owed possession. A desire, a lust, a dream, just dancing in the wind, and the only thing stopping it is Hannibal’s iron self-control.

“So our bargain is fulfilled,” Hannibal says. “Where will you go now, Will?”

Will sighs. “I don’t know. I have no idea how to get home.”

“Then, perhaps, it is time for a new bargain.”

Will gives him a look. “I can still blast you across the clearing and kill you dead,” he reminds the evergreen.

Hannibal gives him that sharp fanged grin. “Why do you think I wish to make a bargain?”

It turns out that the magic of evergreens is so wild because most of it is focused on their wings and flying, and since they exhaust so much energy flying year round, they don’t devote a lot to other pursuits. In return for food and water and shelter, Will begins the arduous process of warding Hannibal’s very large home beneath the stump. He casts spells to ensure that it remains sturdy, to keep the cracks sealed and the cold out, and to protect it from being scented or seen by predators. It’s a long, long process.

“Leaves above and below,” Will exclaims when Hannibal leads him to another tunnel. “How many years have you spent digging these things?”

“I’ve been alone for a long, long time,” is all Hannibal says.

And, yeah, Will can sort of see why. Hannibal is kind of strange and wild. He takes pleasure in hunting down squirrels and chipmunks, which Will’s kind would always run from, and it’s true that the stews he makes of them are tasty and the furs are warm, but it still remains that it’s certainly an off-putting hobby.

To most, anyways.

Will perches on the edge of the table and watches as Hannibal methodically cuts apart a squirrel and take it into the nest piece by piece. Some he puts aside for the night's dinner, but the rest he smokes or salts or does . . . whatever he does with it.

Deciduous do not eat meat, but Will is growing a taste for it, and it is a taste matched only by his growing taste for Hannibal.

Hannibal is strange and wild and sometimes standoffish, but he is also verbose and nonjudgmental and strong. They debate history and community lore. They explore aboveground and uncover new tunnels in the soft dirt of their nest. They share tricks of hunting and spell casting, although the sheer force of his magic makes Will's teeth vibrate when he utilizes it to take down prey that rightly should be swallowing him whole, and when he flies, Will almost wishes that he had wings too so that he could fly with him.

It's probably his own longing for wings that distracts him from recognizing the pattern of Hannibal's flights.

That being said, even he's not so dense as to misunderstand Hannibal giving him the first meat of a kill, wound tight with fresh herbs and the kinds of vegetation Will grew up eating.

"Are you courting me?"

Hannibal hums. "The tone of your voice conveys . . . disbelief. Why?"

"You're an evergreen. I'm a deciduous. Your kind think that mine are soft-hearted and foolish, to have given up our wings."

"I think you are strong," Hannibal counters. He sits next to Will and braces his chin on his hands, his eyes intense and his wings mantled high. "I think you are determined and willing to do what is necessary to survive. The choice of your ancestors to give up your wings was exactly that: the choice of your ancestors. I cannot fault you for it."

"But, Hannibal," Will says, "don't you understand? I can never fly with you all year round."

"Then I'll fly for you. Besides, I made a nest on the ground. We do not need to fly to reach it."

"And they say my kind are determined."

"And they say mine are evasive," Hannibal says, "and yet here we are, with you dancing out of my reach. If you do not want me, Will, then I will accept it. I am not so young as to take it as an unforgiveable slight. We can weather the winter as cohabitants of this nest, and you may leave when the snows melt to find your community again. I will not stop you."

Will thinks of his home, neat and tidy and lonely. He's spent his entire life alone, and he once dreaded finding another to intrude upon his neat and tidy life, but Hannibal is different. Hannibal interweaves his daily life with Will's, and they always seem to gravitate to the same room no matter what, even though Hannibal's nest is big enough that they could go days

without seeing hair or wing of each other. Hannibal brought him proof of his strength and acknowledgement of Will's roots.

"No one has ever wanted me before," Will whispers.

"Perhaps, my deciduous," Hannibal says, letting his wings brush Will's shoulders, "you simply never gave them a chance to see the wonder that you carry inside."

The first frost has encrusted the ground when Will lets his wings bloom for the first time. It hurts, of course, to let his wings break free of his back and be exposed to open air for the very first time in his life, but Hannibal soothes him with his own wild magic and guides him safely back into the nest.

"I do not understand why you needed to let your wings burst free outside in a leaf pile," Hannibal frets, plying him with warm soups.

"It's tradition," Will says, smiling as he brings Hannibal close and lets his evergreen enclose worried wings around them both. "We deciduous draw upon the strength of dying leafs to power the change, for they still have sparks of the tree's own magic, and we can drain it to sustain ourselves without draining the tree's own power. We save that for the truly desperate situations when the snows come and food is scarce."

Hannibal snorts. "We let our wings bloom inside our nests," he says. "Where it is safe, and no predators may happen upon us as we scream."

"Well, I have my own predator, don't I?"

"You will make a fine predator of your own, my Will," Hannibal laughs into his neck. "I will teach you to hunt and to dive and to kill, and you will be all the more glorious for it. They will never see you coming."

Will flicks his wings, wincing. They are still quite damp, but thankfully, Hannibal's nest is warm enough that they can dry without turning brittle and tearing. With a few days to strengthen them, he can fly like any other faerie. "That might be rather difficult," he drawls. "Given that my wings are the color of blood."

Hannibal grins, sharp fanged as always, and Will loves him for it. "Ah, but in the moonlight, they will be black as night. Blood always looks black in the moonlight."

"If you say so."

"I do say so, my deciduous. Yield to my experience, yes?"

Will snorts and rolls his eyes. "Yield to you, my evergreen? Never."

"That's the spirit."

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

Day 4 is "Ritual". This will either up weird and fantasy like "Leaf Piles" or something more sober and like . . . post WotL. We'll see.

P.S. I was going back to add tags and I did NOT realize that the first option for "faeries" was "Faeries made them do it". I was so goddamn tempted to use that tag, oh my god....

Ritual

Chapter Summary

> “I said I’d volunteer to be your ritual sacrifice to stop a monster from devouring the town, I never said I’d be a *willing* ritual sacrifice," Will says.

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for this chapter: lots of murder. Also age difference. And mention of human experimentation and vivisection. Fun stuff.
>
> This ficlet was inspired by a chance comment from victorine :P Curse you for giving me plot bunnies, Vic! *shakes fist*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first day, Will strolls into town, he is greeted by alarmed looks, harried whispers on the street, and people that take great pains to get out of his way. He just shrugs and pays for a hot meal and a soft bed, because he’s really just passing through.

The second day, he watches as some of the townspeople construct a great altar of wood in the distance and thinks, *Well, that’s weird*. But all little towns have their own quirks, so he just shrugs and continues sharpening his knife.

The third day, he wakes up to six men in his room and a knife leveled at his throat.

“This is definitely not your room, and I’ve certainly paid more than enough to stay for a full week,” Will says after a moment. “So much as it pains me, I really must ask you to go the hell away and let me sleep.”

“Get up,” grunts the man with a knife at his throat.

Will looks at the slightly trembling hand that holds the knife, at the way the men around the edge hold chairs and fire irons as makeshift weapons, at the way that the window and door is unbarred. He sighs. They are clearly new to this business, and that unfamiliarity has translated into about a dozen escape routes. Will takes the easiest – kicking the knife-wielder in the groin and then flicking out his own knife as the man crashes to the floor – and then swiftly disarms and knocks out the rest.

When the town sheriff comes, Will just says, “I did warn them, you know.”

The sheriff, whose badge says Jack Crawford, sighs and rubs at his forehead. His shoulders are bowed with the same tension that had made the hands of Will's attackers tremble. He sits down and gestures for Will to sit next to him, and Will does, waiting to see what happens next. It looks like the start to a very long boring story, but Will has been wrong before.

"I apologize," Crawford says wearily. "They were . . . Well. This town is cursed. I imagine that they felt you were the best opportunity we had had in years, and they decided to attempt to seize it."

Will snorts. "Don't play games with me, Crawford. I'm a hunter; I know when a curse has been laid."

"And yet," Crawford replies, "how long did it take you to find out town? It doesn't look that hard on a map, does it? We have moved the town a hundred times over, and yet no matter what, we can never leave. The curse has a tight grip upon all of us, despite our best efforts."

"So call in the King's Guard. They're well equipped to handle these sorts of things."

Crawford smiles grimly. He reaches for his belt and swiftly removes six metal squares that gleam in the firelight. When Will leans closer, he realizes that each is marked with the sigil of the King's Guard: two are mages, three are knights, and one is a scholar. Of course, the squares are more than just sigils; they are the mark of the King's Guard and not a single one is ever seen without the badge to mark them.

Will looks at Crawford. "These badges are burned when a member of the King's Guard dies. Or they are collected and returned to the capital."

"There weren't any survivors. And no one would come to claim the badges."

Will looks longingly at his pack. He had planned to refresh and move on to the next hunt, but although all hunters are motivated by the money, most of them started out wanting to save lives. And while he doesn't exactly believe in a curse, since he performed all the usual steps before he went to bed and nothing odd happened, clearly *something* unnatural is plaguing this town.

"All right," Will says, blowing out a long breath. "Tell me of this curse, then, Crawford."

"Will you stop wriggling, you're making it difficult to tie these knots."

Will grunts. "I said I'd volunteer to be your ritual sacrifice to stop a monster from devouring the town, I never said I'd be a *willing* ritual sacrifice."

Crawford gives him the stink eye and ties the knot even tighter.

"Look," Will hisses, "you said that the monster is always watching. If it is watching, then you'd best make sure I look appetizing and not prepared to gut it in three seconds flat, which means that I need to look unwilling because I'm definitely not part of your town."

"Why can't you be a struggling, crying one?"

“Because I don’t do crying.”

“I think the monster likes the crying ones more,” a man volunteers. It’s one of the ones Will clocked over the head two hours ago, and when Will twists around and glares at him, he quickly turns white and steps back.

To be fair, apparently their monster has terrorized this town for twelve years and taken who knows how many people as food or entertainment or whatever. According to Crawford, it first came during the winter and stole an entire family one by one, and through a lot of fighting and crying and praying, they’ve learned that it will only leave them in peace if they sacrifice one healthy person to it. The monster’s tastes run particular: it prefers healthy and young and they’ve usually given it virgins as well, although the virginity bit doesn’t exactly stop it from eating more people if it feels slighted by the offered sacrifice. No one who has ever seen it has lived to tell the tale, so no one knows exactly what it looks like, but the tracks it leaves in the dirt are unlike any creature on record.

Will has a dagger forged of consecrated steel and quenched in holy water, so he doesn’t really care what the creature looks like. His dagger has never let him down.

“Okay, we’re done here,” Crawford announces after circling the altar one last time. “Good luck, hunter.”

Then they abandon Will without a backwards glance.

Will leans back and looks at the slowly emerging stars above and takes a deep breath. This is the part of the hunt he hates the most – the waiting – but it’s also the most valuable part, when he can rest and gather his strength. He’s learned to never waste it, so he breathes in the cold night air and just waits for the monster to reveal its face.

“They must be truly desperate.”

Will comes awake with a jerk to find that night has completely fallen, drenching the clearing into darkness. All of the torches have either burned out or been toppled, so Will cannot actually see anything.

That doesn’t really matter though; he can *feel* the monster, and that’s enough.

“Who must be?” Will asks.

The monster shifts slightly, because Will can hear the unnatural *shh* sound of limbs moving. It doesn’t sound like any monster Will has ever faced, but new monsters are discovered every year. The voice is what gets him; most monsters, especially those who take human sacrifices, don’t speak human tongues. Sirens lure in their prey, but that is because they lure in their prey – this monster has merely been demanding sacrifices by brute force.

“The villagers. You are not one of them. They must be desperate to offer you instead.”

“Would you believe me if I said I volunteered?”

The monster laughs, low and soft. “Yes,” it says, “you smell of determination and adventure. There is no smell of blood on you, and I suspect you would have fought to free yourself if they had attempted to kidnap you.”

“They did attempt to kidnap me.”

“How unsurprising. They have no imagination. And no manners.”

Will grunts and tilts his neck to ease the crick in it. He’s not sure how long he’s slept, but it’s been long enough for all the stars to come out and for his body to feel almost frozen. “Look, can we get this show on the road? I’m really cold and it’s kind of weird to talk to someone without seeing their face.”

“What is this show you speak of? I am given to understand that humans cannot see in the dark.”

“Then let me light a torch, so that we might both see.”

“And have you kill me, hunter? I am not one to give my enemies an advantage so easily.”

Will wriggles in his bonds and sighs. Crawford really did tie him tightly. “And you, are you blind in the dark? Can you not see the ropes that bind me?”

The monster slithers closer. This time, even though Will cannot see, he can feel the gust of wind as the monster breathes. It must be enormous; Will revises his estimate of where the likely weak spots are and begins to devise new plans to strike. He can’t see very well in the dark, but he did do intense night training; he can at least make a guess as to where the monster is by the sounds it makes.

“Of course I can. But you are a hunter; I can smell the salt and the iron and the holy water on you. You would sooner strike than speak if I gave you sight as well. So tell me, hunter: why did you volunteer to be my sacrifice in this ritual?”

“I am a hunter. I promised to save lives.”

“Did you?” The monster paused. “Yet when your hunts are done, you move on. Winter takes its hold, and so does hunger. Do you defend those lives, hunter? Or what of the lives taken by drought or flood? “

“Those are natural disasters. I am a hunter, not a mage or a scientist.”

“You say that like I am not natural. No tragedy made me, hunter. I was born of this land the same as you. I take lives just like you. We are not so different, in the end.”

Will grunts and slices through the last rope. It is difficult to slice without pausing in his words, but he thinks of the thinness of the children, the paleness of the adults’ faces, the desperation of a people facing down certain death, and against that it is no challenge to wriggle free of his bonds. He flips up and over the altar, and in the next moment, sends his dagger flying straight at the monster’s heart.

The monster grunts.

Will strikes his flint and seizes the nearest torch, but when he turns to face the monster head on, he freezes.

From the chest up, the monster is nothing but a man. A well-dressed man, actually, in clothes carefully tailored and preserved, with a face handsome enough to pass for any of the knights or princes. The only distinction that marks him as Will's prey is the dagger planted in the man's chest.

From the waist down, of course, is a different story. There, Will sees only a nest of tentacles, black as night and sinuous as a pit of snakes. Some are thicker than Will's waist, and some are a slender as his finger. It certainly explains the slithering noises, but it also means that when the monster straightens to his full height, he stands far over Will's head and smiles with jagged sharp teeth.

"I have always admired hunters," says the monster, and his eyes are so red that Will feels trapped in their gaze. "They are so clever, if rather dull."

The blade clatters to the floor, leaving only a slowly spreading dark patch on the monster's chest.

"But your weapon cannot hurt me," the monster continues, "for I am consecrated too. I was baptized once upon a time, hunter; did you really think all of your so-called monsters were born of the same darkness?"

Will shrugs. "It was worth a shot."

Then he lowers the torch and lets the fires blaze. Crawford and his men had poured oil upon the ground and then the snow had fallen on the top of it; the monster's tentacles had not noticed the immediate difference, but now the fires spring up through the clearing, forming a giant ring of flames, and the monster looks mildly impressed.

"Where darkness lies," Will quotes, "fire cleanses."

"Only if there is something to be cleansed," the monster replies. "I bathed this morning."

Will stamps on the first tentacle that sneaks around the altar to seize at his foot, but he misses the second; that one drags him face first into the stone. The blow dazes him, and when the third tentacle sneaks around his throat, Will can't help but claw at it for breath, abandoning the makeshift weapon he's made of the nearest torch.

"I take it back," the monster says, coming closer. His hands are freezing when they touch Will's cheeks. "I do like you as my sacrifice."

Will wakes up in the monster's den, stripped of all his weapons and attached to a bolt in the wall by a long, thin chain of shining metal. His attempts to break it earn him nothing but frustration and bruises, and he is quite annoyed by the time the monster deigns to appear.

“If you’re going to kill me, get it over with,” he snarls.

The monster continues setting out plates and bowls as though Will had not spoken. His voice is quite pleasant when he speaks. “Why would I kill you?”

“Why not? I don’t see any other human sacrifices trapped in here with me.”

“Oh, those I did kill. Their bodies I abandoned to the snow a long time ago, I’m afraid. Although I do have a few of their bones if you wish to attempt to carve weapons of them. Souvenirs and all that.”

Will bears his teeth when the monster offers him a bowl. “I’ll not be fed as a pig for slaughter.”

“You would make terrible bacon,” the monster says, and his tone is one of faint scolding. “And bitter ham. I am not going to eat you, William Graham. I am merely trying to put some well-cooked food in our belly, since you are so thin that apparently no one else has seen fit to ensure that you do not perish of malnutrition.”

Will draws back into the wall instinctively. He hasn’t used the Graham name since he first awoke in the halls of the hunters. No hunters use a family name; they are the vultures of society, outcasts but valuable to cut loose. “Who told you my name?”

“You did,” the monster says. “When you were but nine winters old.”

Unease creeps through Will’s belly. He remembers the first sighting of the monster, of that normal human body meshed with the frightful tentacles underneath, and recalls his lack of surprise. He had blamed it on his training, to push away the shock and attack at the first opportunity, but – but Will had sensed the first tentacle coming. He had stepped on it, and known exactly where to place his weight to make the monster hiss and retreat.

Yet Will has never studied whatever creature this monster is. He knows that.

“You have forgotten me, Will,” the monster says. He places the bowl in Will’s lap. “But I suppose that is to be expected. It has been thirteen years that the mages have had their claws in you.”

“I’ve never met you,” Will says. “I would have killed you, if I had.”

The monster smiles and tilts his head to the side. His arms lay dormant at his side, but his tentacles rise like a living cloud, swiftly divesting him of his garments until he crouches bare before Will. He looks like a normal man in flesh too, but for a ghastly wound in his side, like he had been pierced with a great lance and left to perish.

“You did try,” the monster tells him. “You were quite a ferocious child, even at nine years old. It took me days to heal. Why do you think I decided to train you instead?”

“I don’t – ”

“Eat,” the monster commands. “It is no use arguing what you do or do not remember. Only time will tell that.”

The first sip of the stew sears through Will’s heart. It is warm and thick and hearty, and he can name all of the ingredients from the first taste. Will normally disdains stew, and he certainly refused to eat it during his training; now he understands that it is because it could never quite match up to his expectations.

Expectations he apparently gained from eating in the den of a monster.

“If you know my name,” Will says, eyes shut tight against the impossible, “then good manners would dictate you told me yours. What is it?”

A tentacle curls around Will’s foot. It is light and insubstantial, but it feels as heavy as a yoke upon Will’s neck. He knows exactly what the tentacle should feel like. He can picture it, in his mind’s eye. He knows this monster, somehow.

“In time, you will remember,” the monster says quietly. “In time.”

Will still pulls and wriggles against the chain, because he has nothing better to do. But it is more out of habit than actual desire. This monster knows far too much about him, and the logical conclusion is either that he speaks the truth and Will did know him, once upon a time, or that the monster has mind-reading powers and has merely implanted false memories in Will’s mind.

Something in Will’s mind rages against the latter. Above all else, he knows the monster values manners. And he would definitely see the implantation of false memories as rude.

“How did we meet?” Will asks.

“You were playing in the snow,” the monster replies, bent over the table and making tiny incisions in a cloth. “You slipped and grabbed one of my legs to steady yourself. When you saw what had saved you, you stabbed me in the gut.”

“Uh,” Will stutters, because what else can he say? “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” the monster says airily. “I was originally going to eat you.”

“No, you weren’t, Hannibal,” Will says, rolling his eyes. “Stop telling lies, you were too busy trying to hold your guts in to attempt to eat – Hannibal.”

“Yes?”

Will sits up and stares at him. For all of the monster’s studied nonchalance, his fingers have stopped moving, and his tentacles are a restless crowd below him. When Will wriggles a foot, two break off and curl around him, and he shivers because he remembers the touch, but distantly, like a dream long forgotten.

“Your name,” Will says, “it’s Hannibal.”

Hannibal comes to him then, and this time when he touches Will's face, his hands are warmer than any fire. His eyes are still so red, burning in the dark, but Will looks into them and sees the same burning eyes that snarled in fury when Will was dragged away. He looks at Hannibal's tentacles and sees the same ones that threw men high into the sky and clear across the forest in his fury. He looks at Hannibal's hands and sees the same ones that shielded Will from cross bolts and fire blasts.

"My Will," Hannibal murmurs, "you are beginning to remember."

Will blinks, dazed, and finds himself lying on the ground, gasping. Hannibal's tentacles draw him close, and Will clutches at Hannibal's chest and tries to breathe.

"Hannibal," Will says, "Hannibal, tell me – tell me everything."

"Oh, my darling, we would be here for an eon and beyond if I did that," Hannibal laughs. He presses a kiss to Will's hair. "I saved you from the snow and took you in. I taught you how to hunt. And you were so beautiful, my darling, and you fought so valiantly when the hunters came for you. The monster whisperer, they called you, for they saw that I had never harmed you. They thought you a siren capable of taming monsters, and it was only when they had seized you and tied you to their table and cut you open that they understood that you had no magic. So instead they took your memories and left you in those halls to wander, like a forgotten toy."

It's like coming within sight of a waterfall; the roar of memories grows louder and louder, and the taste of water on the back of his tongue all the stronger. Will remembers, distantly, blood on the fresh snow and bright lights in his eyes and screams, Hannibal's and his, desperate and furious.

"They cut you nearly in two, Hannibal," Will whispers. "How did you survive, they told me they had *killed you*."

Hannibal hushes him and rocks him like a child. His tentacles have swallowed Will whole; there is not a single part of him not shielded by Hannibal. "You gave me a boon once, as recompense for stabbing me. Your first laugh, your first baby teeth, your first tear. It gave me just enough strength to live."

"You shouldn't have had to," Will says fiercely, because Will had not given it to Hannibal as a protection against death, but merely a token of his affection. "They should have just left us in peace."

Twelve years, Crawford had said. Twelve years the monster had terrorized them and followed them no matter where they had fled.

"Twelve years," Will murmurs. "One for every year I was not with you."

"I was teaching them a lesson," Hannibal says. "And the fates have at last returned you to me. I imagine Crawford was not happy to see you returned to them, even though you were a hunter with no memories left."

Will presses his face to Hannibal's chest and remembers the sight of Crawford in the snow, determinedly tying closed the nets that had caged Will as they dragged him from Hannibal's side. Crawford had called him a wolf-child and throttled him until he could hardly breathe, and then he had delivered Will to the halls of the hunters bound in chains and left with a heavy sack of gold.

"Are you going to kill him?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, like a promise. "He had no right to involve the hunters and take you from me. He had no right to spread lies of you being a monster whisperer. He had no right to lay hands on you at all. You were mine from the moment you first touched me."

The last memory slides into place: Will, young and beaming in the winter, frost steaming from his breath, laughing and leaping to catch snowflakes until he had slipped and the joy had turned to abject terror. He had thrashed about, grabbing for anything to stop his fall, and his fingers had clenched tight around what he had thought was a root. Instead, a monster of two worlds had emerged, and Will had closed his hands on the nearest stake and thrust it through the monster's chest.

Hannibal had beamed and coughed and said, "What is your name?"

Will had crossed his arms and stuck out his tongue and said, "Will."

Will opens his eyes. The chains fall away, only now Will sees that they were never chains at all. They were merely Hannibal's attempts to break the manacles placed on Will's wrists, so that he might never remember what the hunters had taken from him.

The manacles are sturdy and strong, the best the capital could forge. But Hannibal has been a part of Will for so long that even magic can only do so much.

"Hannibal," Will says, and he savors the name on his tongue, "I want to watch."

They leave Crawford's broken body in the snow upon the altar along with Will's shattered manacles. Thirteen victims for thirteen years, and Hannibal is satisfied enough that it takes only a little nudging from Will to turn his gaze further north, where the tales of the monster whisperer might not yet have spread. It is easy enough to pack Hannibal's belongings, for Hannibal had destroyed most of their nest in a fit of fury upon realizing that Will had been dragged all the way to the capital, which was too strong for even Hannibal to attack outright. He has lived sparsely since then, and Will keeps everything he has ever loved in a pack, so within an hour they are ready.

Will climbs aboard Hannibal's back and winds his legs tight around his monster's waist. He lays his cheek to Hannibal's shoulder and hums in satisfaction at the tentacles that curl lovingly about his arms and legs.

"Take us north, Hannibal," Will says. "Let's find a new home."

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

Day 5 is "Scarves". Last year I went very light-hearted, tonally speaking, and it looks to end up that way again.

Also I do apologize for the sharp right turn this ficlet took into dark territory, I was NOT expecting that. It was supposed to be a fun little exploration into Hannibal liking his human sacrifice too much to eat him and instead we got like. a backstory and plot. IDK. I suppose I should have expected it, given that my last ritual ficlet gained an entire backstory about angels and the fall of Lucifer. *sigh*

End Notes

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